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# NATURAL SELECTION IN RELIGIOUS EVOLUTION

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*So universal is the interest in concrete religion that men are too much given to considering its details rather than religion itself. Professor Drake's treatment will serve to correct this mistaken view. Religious acts are no more important than the history of religion as a whole. The neglect of wide views in history is almost certain to bring into too great prominence details rather than movements. The history of religion can no more than any other sort of history be understood by an infinite number of Doctor's theses unified by a card catalogue.*

Of the countless varieties of historic and prehistoric religion only a few have survived to our day. These represent a long development, and are still in process of change. Can we discern any dominant causes that have brought about the survival of just these religions and determined their growth in just these directions; or deduce from our survey of the past their probable future direction of growth?

It is no explanation to assume the unfolding of a universally present "religious instinct." Religious evolution is not a self-contained process, bearing within itself its own explanation, as an acorn contains the germ of all that the oak is to be. There is no single religious instinct. Rather, there have been innumerable forces at work producing continually new variations in ideal and belief. Of these a few have outlived the others. It is a plain case of survival of the fittest.

We must discriminate between originating causes of religious variations and survival-causes. The former have been too numerous even to summarize here.

They are to be understood in terms of contemporary social and intellectual changes. Whatever activities and ideas are vital in the life of any tribe or nation are seen to be reflected in religious practices. A religion may veer in any direction under the influence of the fortunes of the people, their changing science and philosophy, their political and cultural status, the conscious or unconscious manipulation of priests. The dominance of this cult or that has been determined largely by the physical superiority of the conquering nations. And then, great personalities have molded the religion of their countrymen in the direction of their personal visions and convictions. In short, all sorts of forces, pushing in all sorts of directions, have reinforced or opposed one another, and in this locality or that have produced almost every sort of imaginable faith.

Yet underlying this tangle of forces there has been, on the whole, a drift in certain definite directions; a few constant causes have determined, in the long run, which of the many competing

cults should survive. In the end, those varieties of religion seem likely to prevail which best meet three deep-rooted human needs: the need for consolation, for inspiration, and for comprehension. Conceptions and practices which are more cheering and hope-giving, those which are more moral or spiritual (i.e., lead the believer into the better ways of life), and those which are more rational (i.e., more in harmony with unprejudiced observation of what is true or probable), have an inherent stability which is lacking to the gloomy or fearful beliefs, to the lower ideals, or to the more fantastic conceptions.

These three survival-causes cannot *produce* the higher varieties of religion; they simply operate, like the forces that Darwin discovered at work among organic forms, to preserve and spread such few among the many variations as are best fitted to survive. It is exactly so, of course, in the field of morals, in the field of art, in every field where change is at work. Forces largely irrational, irrelevant to the values produced, keep new species forever emerging; but their *rationale*, their value, determines in the end which of them shall remain in existence.

Let me illustrate this threefold process of natural selection. And first, the survival-value of the element of consolation in a religion. Why have most Christians ceased to believe in original sin, in hell, in the Calvinistic type of God, who grimly damns the great majority of his helpless creatures to eternal torment? Not because of the discovery of a lack of logic in the arguments of those who preached these doctrines; few who reject them today could say

what those arguments were. They are not interested in the arguments, because, argument or no argument, their souls refuse to entertain the beliefs; they are too depressing. Gloomy beliefs may long ride men, like a nightmare; but sooner or later they must succumb to more buoyant views. Men crave consolation, men want to hope; and they will not forever be satisfied with world-views that cross this fundamental need.

Buddhism may perhaps be cited as a pessimistic religion that has survived. But Buddhism is not pessimistic in relation to the religions it conquered. It was a religion of deliverance from the depressing world-view prevalent at its inception; it has been a vast comfort to millions who without it would have known no hope of escape from the pitiless round of unhappy reincarnations. And Buddhism today, when confronted with Christianity, is relatively unstable, in large measure owing to the latter's larger and more beautiful faith.

The rapidity with which primitive Christianity spread, like a prairie fire, over the parched and hope-starved Roman empire was due, among many causes, primarily to the sweetness of consolation that it offered. Few stopped to examine proofs, few were capable of appraising the evidence by which its assertions were supported. It was accepted as thirsty men accept a draught of water. The great loving Father-God had sent his Anointed One to earth to announce his plan for men; a glorious future awaited them if they would but believe and trust in him; this Divine Man had suffered, just as they had to suffer; all was intended and right, and

paved the way to a Great Consummation. A new value was at once added to life; its accidents became unimportant in the light of the future. Christ, the Good Shepherd, came closer to the heart than the Jewish Jehovah, and far closer than the cold and impersonal God of Greek philosophy, offering a more intimate personal relationship and a more assured hope in the beyond. The present world was soon coming to naught, the new age at hand, wherein each was to receive his reward according to his labor and faith. It is small wonder if these Christians went about with radiant faces and rejoicing hearts, drawing gradually to their fold those that labored and were heavy laden, seeking the rest that Christ had promised to those who followed him.

Another example of the survival-value of optimism in a religion is to be found in the growth and spread of monotheism. The line of development from polytheism to monotheism is not a highway along which mankind as a whole has advanced. On the contrary, it is only in a few exceptional cases that such an evolution occurred. But when a monotheistic belief had once become anywhere firmly established, it was almost certain ultimately to outstrip and overcome its rivals. For polytheism, though a more natural and instinctive reaction to the complex and often opposed forces of nature, leaves the mind confused and hope uncertain. However favorably disposed a god may be, his power is limited by that of other and perhaps less beneficent beings. Athene, for example, was sure to work for the city that bore her name; but Hera's power was also to be reckoned with.

Jehovah would fight for his tribes, but so would Baal and Chemosh for theirs. Only when the belief should grow up of a single God of all peoples, all-powerful and beneficent, could men feel wholly confident in his strength.

Actually, a monotheistic belief developed in several places, under the influence of quite different causes. But the monotheism of the Greeks was too speculative, too lacking in roots in the soil, to spread far beyond the circle of the educated or survive the overthrow of Hellenic culture. The monotheism (if it may be so called) of the Brahmanic priests was likewise too speculative, too lacking in warmth of human interests and idealism, so that it waned before the more spiritual atheism of Buddha—though it is noteworthy that the hunger for a God to trust in quickly found another object in the worship of Buddha himself. The monotheism of ultimate importance to the world was that which developed within the Hebrew religion. The process of development can be readily traced in the Old Testament, and is now familiar to all students who approach it in the modern historical spirit. The enhancement of Jehovah's powers until he came to be thought of as the only God worthy of worship, and finally as the only existing God, was a process close to the practical life of men; it was linked with historical and local events, and brought into play the patriotism and moral power of an intense and ardent people. Instead of offering a vague hope, such as we find in Marcus Aurelius, that events are ultimately governed by reason and therefore to be patiently, even loyally, acquiesced in, it brought, in its eventual

form, a pledge to the individual of the fulfilment of his personal hopes and longings. A belief so inspiring as this found ready and tenacious acceptance; given favorable conditions, it was bound to extend its influence far.

But if religion owes its origin and actual development in part to man's need of deliverance from the fear of the Powers behind nature, and his longing to feel them at bottom friendly to him, it also in part owes the course of its development to his need of deliverance from himself, from his restlessness and cross-purposes, from his weight of selfishness and sin. The pleasures which he seeks too often turn to ashes in his hands; the passions that lure him on leave him dissatisfied; he is the victim of his own impulses and longings, often impotent to control his own soul and without any satisfaction for his bewildered heart. In a happy environment, as, for a brief period, among the classic Greeks, he may live in the moment and avoid any marked revulsion of spirit. But in a less healthy-minded community, as throughout the Greco-Roman world at the advent of Christianity, or, earlier, in India at the advent of Buddhism, there is an insistent craving for a higher and more spiritual life. Any religion that links with its assurance of hope high moral ideals is so much the more likely to win converts, offering to them the prize of purity and loyalty and self-forgetting service, which alone can lift the human heart above internal discord and disillusion and give life dignity and lasting joy.

Examples of this survival-value of moral idealism in a religion can be found on every hand—in the triumph of Zoro-

astrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Mohammedanism, over the faiths they respectively superseded, or in the dominance of those pagan cults that symbolized and enshrined patriotism and civic loyalty. We are prone to forget this earnest and deeply moral aspect of the pagan religions; but, like loyalty to flag or sovereign today, loyalty to the gods and goddesses of the Greek and Latin states was a symbolic and imaginative way of expressing the community spirit, which drew men out of their selfishness, gave them something great and self-transcending to live for, and spurred them to courage and discipline and effort. One who reads the *Annals* of Plutarch sees there what splendid devotion this civic religion bred; one who hears of the Spartan lads, from their childhood living for the larger life of which they were a part—not only ready, if necessary, to die for their country, but undergoing a daily discipline and self-denial for her—can never speak of such examples of the pagan religion without reverence and a touch of wistful regret. Higher though the Christian religion is in most of its ideals, it has never yet evolved so intense a social consciousness as had flourished for a time in the ancient world.

This civic virtue had, however, disappeared through the operation of various forces, before Christianity began her triumphal march westward. And her conquest of the West was due, in part to the sweetness of her faith, in large part also to the New Life which was linked with this Great Hope and its witness. Already the Kingdom of God was in a sense present, in the hearts of the faithful, a redemption from the

vanity and sin of the existing order. Instead of the exaltation of might, the pride of power, the wantonness of luxury, the new teaching enjoined patience, humility, purity, simplicity of life. The primitive church was an intimate brotherhood, caring for the poor and the weak in its membership, showing kindness to all, and rejoicing in its discovery of the glory of self-forgetting love and service. As the high idealism of the Prophets, some centuries before, had leavened Judaism, transforming it from a semi-barbarous cult into a religion whose dominant note was the vigorous pursuit of personal and national righteousness, so that religion, sweetened and further spiritualized by Jesus, now began to leaven the pagan world. It could not retain its original fervor and purity—religious progress comes in waves, with long troughs between the crests—but it has been the greatest power in the world since that day for the moralization of man.

It would be easy to analyze these recurrent waves of reform within the church, and note how generally the moral note was predominant. St. Francis, Luther, Wesley, Channing—the great leaders that have swayed Christian thought have been men of deeper moral insight than their contemporaries, men who have called their fellows to a better life, and rejected current doctrines not so often for their inconsonance with fact as for their relative immorality. The Protestant Reformation, for example, was primarily a moral protest, and the Unitarian movement in America largely a revulsion from the immoral conception of God taught by the then current Calvinism.

If space allowed, it would be profitable to point out how such concepts as "sacrifice" and "sin" have developed from non-moral beginnings a significance so deeply moral that we have almost forgotten their original meaning. On the whole, and in spite of eddies in the current, it is clear that, other things being equal, the religions, and the types of a given religion, which tend to win the day are those of higher moral vision.

The reasonableness of a religion—the third of our survival-causes—has counted for much less historically. The protests of cultivated Greeks, to whom the gospel was naturally "foolishness"—a *βάρβαρον δόγμα*—availed naught against the inspiring and consoling values of the new faith. And although Christian doctors have never ceased, from the outset, to justify their beliefs to the intellect with ever-varying and often elaborately ingenious logic, the historian perceives that the faith was primary and the reasoning secondary. The most grotesque and, one would suppose, obviously irrational dogmas never lacked intellectual backing, and scarcely suffered from their remoteness from the realm of observed fact. Reason is the latest developed of man's powers; and except for a brief brilliant period in Greece, and now in quite recent times, the irrationality of a belief has been a hardly appreciable handicap.

The rationality of a religion is rapidly becoming, however, of decisive importance. The scientific temper that demands evidence for proffered beliefs, and will not make its judgment blind, is infecting our biblical studies and our theological discussions. And just as

among the later Greeks and Romans the old religions, with all their poetry and social value, crumbled before the merciless analysis of a rising intellectual temper, so today the traditional dogmas of Christianity are being subjected to the criticism of an impartial and cautious logic. We are prone to forget how recent this scientific attitude toward religion is, in any widespread degree. Bishop Butler threw a bombshell when he declared that "reason is the only faculty with which we have to judge concerning anything, even revelation itself." And Channing, less than a hundred years ago, shocked the pious by his attitude toward the faith, expressed in such statements as, "If religion be the shipwreck of understanding, we cannot keep too far from it," or, "If I could not be a Christian without seeking to be rational, I should not hesitate as to my choice."

This scientific spirit, with its insistent demand for evidence, is diminishing the power which the brightness of a religion's faith has to insure its spread, while it increases the survival-value of its consonance with observed fact. To be sure, as the influence of William James' will-to-believe doctrine shows, or the popularity of Bergson's philosophy with a public who comprehend little more than its vaguely optimistic purport, any faith that promises much and assures discouraged hearts of what they would fain believe will always have an enormous advantage in the competition of cults. But the opposition of the Protestant churches to the critical spirit is rapidly diminishing; and the ultimate goal of Protestantism seems to be the

complete rationalization of its beliefs, a whole-hearted acceptance of science as the arbiter of truth, and the formulation of its insights and ideals in terms that science can accept. The promise of that eventual outcome is present in that individual liberty of belief whose seeds were contained in the Reformation. Meanwhile, all sorts of influences within the church are at work to raise the level of her moral teaching and restore her original idealism. Especially noteworthy in the last few years is the movement toward an incorporation in present Christian teaching of the old ideals of civic righteousness, once preached so memorably by the Hebrew prophets but long since lapsed from the consciousness of their spiritual heirs.

It seems safe, then, to predict, that whatever currents and cross-currents may affect religious evolution in the future, the eventual outcome is pretty sure to be the dominance of those religions, or that religion, which most successfully combines the three desiderata—faith in an essentially good nature and outcome of the world-process, high moral-spiritual ideals, and consonance with the teachings and spirit of science. A half-blind and mechanical process of natural selection drives in that direction. So, although our efforts can vastly accelerate the process, we need not despair when they seem for the moment futile. The mills of God grind slowly; but that they have long been and are still at work, grinding the wheat from the chaff, in religion as in everything else, a survey of religious history quite clearly shows.